

Improving Communications with Farm Audiences – Ideas for Delaware and Maryland’s Farming System

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Issue:

During the April 2021 *Could COVID-19 Disruption Happen Again? Working Collectively to Build Resilience across our Food and Farm Systems on the Eastern Shore and Delaware*, a small group discussed issues surrounding the instability of food production/harvest. Though assistance was ultimately available to farm producers, key issues raised focused on the confusion of understanding communications about programs, the complexity of the eligibility requirements and the time it took to read through program information only to find that it wasn’t relevant. Examples shared by participants included:

- Paycheck Protection Program - Enrollment opened but banks did not know how to process
- Poultry - Poultry support was announced but majority of Delmarva could not apply
- Small Business Administration PPP and EIDL loans – During the initial announcement, not all areas of agriculture were included.

The small group was tasked with identifying an issue that could be addressed in the short term (3-6 months). To this end it was determined that a briefing paper that raised awareness regarding the identified issues would be developed. The concern identified was the difficulty in navigating, understanding, and participating in federal, state, county, and other related programs because most announcements sent were broad and lacked detail regarding to who and how they could benefit, especially agriculture at the farm level.

Response During Covid – Ideas for the Future

In July 2020, USDA released a guide to assist rural communities better understand resource that could assist during the pandemic

(https://www.rd.usda.gov/sites/default/files/USDA_COVID-19_Fed_Rural_Resource_Guide.pdf)

Additionally, in the spring of 2021, the USDA launched the Pandemic Assistance website as part of their Farmers.gov website (<https://www.farmers.gov/coronavirus/pandemic-assistance>). Here is housed recent press materials and pandemic resources targeted for specific producers. Both these guides offer a listing of resources that can be accessed to support rural communities and agricultural production, respectively.

In Maryland and Delaware, local agencies worked to try to share information with growers by sharing announcements, meeting with farm audiences, and communicating as best as possible of program initiatives that would support production and harvest of commodities grown in our region.

Plain language is a writing technique that prioritizes simple words and straightforward sentence structures. It’s not used to “dumb down” content but to make content more widely accessible and easier for readers to consume. Though this strategy has been adopted in the health, nutrition, and financial literacy fields for many years, USDA has just begun to adopt this strategy of communications within agriculture. More can be done to support the use of plain language in communications with farm audiences, especially for programs and initiatives that can be helpful in supporting production and financial outcomes.

A further review of literature provides the guidelines for creating short, clear communications.

Keys to effective communication include the following suggestions:

- a) Use a headline and opening paragraph - The title and first few sentences should be appropriate to the purpose and intended audience of the message. Communicate initially what and who this announcement is meant for.
- b) Write for your audience - Make a list of who reads your content and what information they need. Provide limitations or eligibility up front. Programs are complex and are often commodity, geographic or user specific. Listing limitations or eligibility provides transparency and reduces time spent.
- c) Use bullets, charts, or graphics to increase understanding - Graphics and short messages are an effective way to communicate a message. This can include some of the complexities, timelines or thresholds within a given announcement or program.
- d) Support announcements with follow up information and next steps - At the closing of the announcement the call to action and next steps will be important information. This includes where to find more detailed information. For the agricultural audience a contact name, email and phone number would be helpful.

Avoid:

- a) Complicated Language - Be aware of the language and words you are using to relay a message. Avoid using jargon, acronyms and extra words or information that does not add to the message and consider using culture and gender-neutral language. If need be, provide definitions or spell out abbreviations.
- b) Unnecessary Information - Lengthy articles will not be read as easily or as much as those that are brief and to the point. Remove any unnecessary information or details that are lengthy, complicated, or vague. Aim for sentences of no more than 25 words and paragraphs of five sentences or fewer.
- c) Passive Voice - This type of writing is when the subject is acted on by the verb. When writing news releases the passive voice can add extra words and make the announcement less effective. Sentences in the active voice have a strong, direct, and clear tone.
- d) Redundancies - These are words or phrases that you do not need to say because you already said them. By removing redundancies, communication is more direct and succinct.

Recommendations:

- 1) Agency communications should have the goal of a creating one-page communications that identify the benefiting audience and eligibility requirements, provide an overview of the program and application process.
- 2) Agencies that are promoting programs should share communications and provide training for other agency personnel who are explicitly or implicitly connected to the communication.
- 3) Identify one or two places to post or share information with farm audiences and try to organize the information for easy access. Additionally, use email and/or local communications/newspapers to help share information. As examples, communications could be disseminated through Face Book, Delmarva Farmer, Lancaster Farmer, Extension Newsletters, Farm Bureau newsletter etc.

Resources

<https://writer.com/resources/plain-language/>

<https://www.archives.gov/open/plain-writing/10-principles.html>

<https://www.usda.gov/plain-writing>

<https://extension.missouri.edu/publications/cm201>

https://www.rd.usda.gov/sites/default/files/USDA_COVID-19_Fed_Rural_Resource_Guide.pdf
<https://www.farmers.gov/coronavirus/pandemic-assistance>